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UNCLAS GUATEMALA 000595

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN, WHA/PDA, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KPAO PREL GT

SUBJECT: PUBLIC DIPLOMACY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT
PRODUCES MIXED REACTION

1. Summary: The Ambassador spoke on background to senior columnists and editorial writers on Feb. 28 to highlight salient aspects of Guatemala's human rights report, traditionally an intensively scrutinized document. PAS arranged to have translated copies available at the end of the briefing and posted both English and Spanish texts on the Embassy website to guarantee thorough coverage. As a result of our efforts, the story was front page news in most major dailies on March 1, as well as fodder for editorials and op-eds. Less evident was any consensus among media about the tenor of the report. End summary

2. The idea behind the briefing was to ensure that the report got widespread attention and a fair reading. By way of context, the Ambassador explained the importance of human rights to our National Security Strategy and the emphasis that President Bush gave in his second inaugural address to freedom and liberty. The Ambassador drew attention to the Human Rights Report's bottom-line assessment that "the Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens; however, very serious problems remained in some areas." The Ambassador reviewed in detail our justification for this evaluation, a significant change from the previous year's conclusion that "the Government's human rights record was poor." Guatemalan journalism, however, suffers from a knee jerk tendency toward pessimism, an almost perverse satisfaction in reporting the negative, and a deep skepticism about human rights improvements. Our hope was that a roundtable effort would result in measured headlines and some honest analysis. The press coverage shows that we achieved our goal only partially.

3. With two exceptions, all front page news stories were negative. Leading daily Prensa Libre ran a banner headline: "U.S. Imputes Assassinations to National Police Agents." Leading business daily Siglo 21's front page banner headline said "U.S. Signals Social Cleansing," and "Credible Reports of Summary Executions in 2004." Tabloid daily Al Dia, also in a front page headline, stated "Police Violate Human Rights; U.S. says Police torture and Kill." Mass circulation daily Nuestro Diario ran an inside story, using man-on-the street interviews to discuss the social cleansing theme.

4. Investigative daily El Periodico, however, ran a page 3 story, "Human Rights in this Country Improved, According to the U.S," and unsurprisingly, government daily Diario de Centroamerica's stories and editorial reiterated that "U.S. Sees Improvement in Respect to Human Rights."

5. Our background briefing had visible impact on editorialists and columnists. Prensa Libre's editorial, headlined "Initial Advance in Human Rights," concluded "this should be considered an important step forward in the recuperation of Guatemala's image as a country in which the state no longer violates human rights, as it once did." Prensa Libre columnist Haroldo Shetemul noted that the report cited major improvements, but he devoted the bulk of his column to negative areas of the report. Siglo 21's Carmen Rosa de Leon-Escribano thought the HRR laid out a useful agenda for the government.

6. Official GOG reaction was restrained. President Berger was quoted in official Diario de Centroamerica saying the HRR was "positive for Guatemala. As President, I am very proud to have advanced so much in one year." Interior Minister Vielmann and Police Chief Sperissen stressed that the HRR recognized that the state no longer had a policy of disregard for human rights. They both acknowledged that the GOG needed to do more to investigate and prosecute individual cases of police abuse and corruption. MFA U/S Marta Altolaquirre told us privately she appreciated the report's overall balance.

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